

Overview

Is Cooperation Un-American?

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We Americans like to think of ourselves as rugged individualists, but few of us resemble our self-sufficient ancestors. Instead, we work in complex organizations where, to get things done, we must collaborate with others.

Unfortunately, because schools still retain organizational patterns and practices developed more than a century ago, they probably do not prepare students very well for today's team-oriented world. There are notable exceptions, of course—talented, gregarious kids who take part in athletics, musical groups, and school clubs—but the majority of ordinary "shy persons," whose school experiences are confined mostly to classrooms, miss out.

In exemplary schools across the country, that is beginning to change. Students in regular academic classes are joining forces to "sink or swim together." The reason, say advocates such as Robert Slavin (p. 7) and David and Roger Johnson (p. 14), is that group work not only develops social skills, it is also a powerful tool for learning. In last month's issue Bruce Joyce and his co-authors (1987) reported, as part of their recent meta-analysis on a variety of teaching strategies, that research on cooperative learning is "overwhelmingly positive" (p. 17).

That should not be surprising. People understand and remember things much better if they talk about them with others; the cognitive processing helps transfer information from short-term to long-term memory.

Another plus for cooperative learning is its potential for influencing peer pressure, a force that severely limits achievement in many schools. When students compete individually, main-

stream students make up for their lack of success by scorning the "nerd" who works hard and thereby makes them look bad. In cooperative classrooms, students encourage their teammates to do well, because they also benefit.

Cooperation pays off not only for young people but also for adults. In this issue we report numerous examples of professional collegiality, ranging from voluntary teacher support groups (p. 36) to peer coaching (p. 40) to inservice programs for principals (p. 70).

But are these trends contrary to basic American values? Is it fair that students should benefit from each other's efforts and share responsibility for what others do or don't do? Ask doctors, who more and more engage in group practice, consulting with one another on difficult cases. Ask ministers, who depend on volunteer committees for much of the work of their churches. Ask military officers, who train young men and women in intricate maneuvers. Ask members of work teams in automated factories. Ask executives involved in team management.

If these typical citizens recognize the role of cooperation in their own lives, they will support the use of cooperative learning in schools. Americans have always prized individuality, and we will continue to, but in the modern world we also need teamwork. □

Reference

Joyce, Bruce, Beverly Showers, and Carol Rolheiser-Bennett. "Staff Development and Student Learning: A Synthesis of Research on Models of Teaching." *Educational Leadership* 45 (October 1987): 11-23.

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